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STATE FOR EUR/UMB, DRL/IRF, DRL/AE

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [PREL](#) [KIRF](#) [MD](#)
SUBJECT: RELIGIOUS LEADERS GATHER AT AMBASSADOR'S RESIDENCE

REFS: A. Chisinau 0034, B. 07 Chisinau 1141, C. 07 Chisinau 0955, D.
07 Chisinau 0089, E. 07 Chisinau 0052

Classified By: Ambassador Michael D. Kirby, for reasons 1.4 (b) and
(d).

11. (SBU) Summary: At the second annual reception in honor of religious freedom on February 28, leaders of 11 religious groups networked on social and spiritual issues, described bureaucratic barriers to registration, and appreciated the venue (the Ambassador's residence), while regretting that ecumenical cooperation too seldom occurs anywhere else in Moldova. End summary.

Friendly Ecumenical Schmoozing at the CMR

12. (SBU) Leaders from Protestant, Jewish, Orthodox (majority Metropolitan Orthodox and Armenian), Latter-day Saint (Mormon), Baha'i, and Muslim organizations thanked the Ambassador for his remarks, which: noted Orthodox-Protestant cooperation as a sign of growing tolerance in Moldova; applauded an increasing recognition of the horrors of the Holocaust in the country; and praised faith-based initiatives to support families and help prevent trafficking in persons. Many of the leaders noted that they had first met each other at the 2007 reception at the Ambassador's residence (ref D), and were clearly more at ease schmoozing across denominational lines this year. In fluid small groups, they discussed common problems-primarily worsening bureaucracy in the Government of Moldova (GOM), but also social problems and even infrastructure: the head of the Armenian Orthodox Church briefed the Lutheran pastor on ways to hook up villages to piped water. Only the two Muslim leaders, from different Tatar organizations, avoided each other. Their groups are facing a GOM-instigated fight (see paras. 7 and 8 below) for the one-and-only Muslim slot on the list of registered religious organizations.

The New Law: Good News on Access to Public Places..

13. (SBU) All in attendance, except for the Muslims, were from registered groups, including the Mormons, whose five-year battle for registration ended successfully in December 2006 (ref E). (Note: Other unregistered groups, such as the Ukrainian Orthodox and Old Rite Russian Orthodox, were invited but did not attend. End note.) In conversations with us last July after the passage of the new religion law (ref C), religious leaders had expressed their pleasure with provisions liberalizing the rules for public meetings (notify, don't ask), and especially with the provisions for easier registration of religious groups. Those present stated that access to public places for religious purposes was now easier to obtain. (Note: the Jehovah's Witnesses, who did not attend the reception, hosted a large outdoor convention last summer, and reported that the only police presence was a small cadre of traffic officers who helped with parking. End note.)

..But Steps Backwards on Promised Registration Improvements

¶4. (C) All present at the reception noted that registration, or even modifications to registration, had become much more difficult. They noted that the change from the Ministry of Interior to the Ministry of Justice (MOJ), as overseer of religious groups in Moldova, has been followed by lowered accessibility to GOM officials, loss of institutional memory and records, and rococo levels of bureaucratic entanglements. The new official in charge of registration, Boris Galan, is hard to reach. Galan did not respond to his invitation to the reception, and has rebuffed requests for working-level meeting with us by demanding a letter from the Ambassador requesting a meeting. Galan's predecessor at the Ministry of Interior's State Services for Religious Affairs, Sergiu Iatco, attended last year's gathering; a Protestant pastor said that Iatco was accessible and honest. Iatco, the pastor noted, also indirectly expressed his frustration at the GOM's intransigence on religious issues and its default position as advocate for the Moldovan Orthodox Church. Galan's office, which registers NGOs and associations, has no experience in religious matters, and apparently is playing a Procrustean role in forcing religious organization rules into Ministry of Justice paradigms.

Stopping Progress with Entangling Rules: Protestants

¶5. (C) Pentecostal Bishop Petru Bors complained that one of his branch churches had been refused registration despite its declared affiliation with the denomination, and noted that his 300 branch churches nationwide are all considered independent associations by the GOM, and therefore he has been blocked from forming any sort of centralized fiscal system. Local pastors, he said, are required to travel to Chisinau individually to pay their taxes. Lutheran Pastor Valentin Dragan, whose denomination once owned one of the largest church buildings in Chisinau (it was destroyed in the early 1960s by the Soviets), said that his efforts to get some form of restitution—even a small plot of land on which to build a church—had been refused by every Chisinau municipal council, including the present Liberal Party administration.

More Restrictive Rules: the Jehovah's Witnesses

¶6. (C) Jehovah's Witnesses did not attend the reception, but have complained to us recently that the MOJ is threatening to cancel the work and residence permits of 12 foreign missionaries unless the church issues work contracts. Since the missionaries work for free, this is not possible, because work contracts require that a salary be listed. Even though the new law says that religious organizations may provide work contracts, the MOJ is interpreting the clause as a requirement.

The Muslims: A Detailed but Ambiguous Refusal

¶7. (C) Talgat Masaev, who heads the Spiritual Gathering of Muslims, spoke about the GOM's December 25, 2007, refusal of his latest request to register. (Note: Masaev told us that his organization attracts over 100 worshippers on special holy days, including some Arab university students, and that he is therefore regarded with greater suspicion by Moldovan security organizations, and has been called in for questioning 15 times. End note.) The registration refusal, Masaev said, consisted mostly of declarations that provisions of the law had been violated in the application, without any explanation of why or how a violation occurred, or any clarification of what the GOM meant by "deviations and inexactitudes."

The Muslims: The GOM Imposes Religious IPR Standards

¶8. (C) Worse than the refusal, according to Masaev, was the fact that the GOM would impose a restrictive requirement on the use of the term Muslim, and would register only one religious organization with the word "Muslim" in its title. The first organization to be so registered would in effect have a copyright on the word, and all other Muslim organizations would then have to register under its aegis. Rustan Ahsanov, leader of the Tuhan Teli Tatar Organization,

confirmed that he had heard the same rumor. Under the conditions of the zero-sum game that the GOM would impose on the Muslim community, it is no surprise that Masaev and Ahsanov studiously avoided each other at the reception. (Note: The GOM is exploiting an ambiguity in the law. In all cases but one, the "name" of the religious organization is qualified as "the exact and complete name." However, in the clause determining that the name cannot be used by third parties, the word "name" occurs without any adjectives. End note.)

19. (C) Comment: Religion matters in Moldova. Refs B and C describe the difficulties encountered by a contact in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and European Integration who has attempted to push the GOM into the mildest sort of ecumenical statements or cooperation. Ref A notes that the GOM is willing even to fight the Chisinau city government over the name and siting of the holiday Christmas tree. We have seen some trans-denominational work in the consortium of Moldovan Orthodox, Bessarabian Orthodox, Baptist, and Lutheran churches which trains its clergy to prevent trafficking in persons and protect victims. However, the only venue for across-the-board meetings of religious groups remains the Ambassador's residence. While some improvements in public access have occurred, the full participation of all religions in Moldova's daily life, and the freedom of all minority religions from bureaucratic harassment, have a long way to go. The Ambassador will request a meeting with the Minister of Justice soon to help move ecumenism out of his living room and into the public square. End comment.

Kirby